

**Report to: Finance and Performance  
Management Cabinet Committee**



**Epping Forest  
District Council**

**Date of Meeting: 24 September 2007**

**Portfolio: Finance, Performance Management and Corporate Support Services.**

**Subject: Best Value Performance Indicators 2006-07 - Customer Satisfaction Surveys.**

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**Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

**That the Committee note:**

- (a) the Council's results in respect of the Best Value Performance Indicator elements of the statutory General, Planning and Benefits customer satisfaction surveys for 2006-07;**
- (b) that presentations on the full results of the 2006/07 surveys will be made to members on 18 October 2007; and**
- (c) that the Council will be participating in a repeat of the General Survey during 2007/08, in order to gather interim satisfaction data and track performance.**

**Introduction:**

1. As members may be aware, the Government introduced a number of Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) in 2000 that require local authorities to survey residents and service users in relation to customer satisfaction every three years. The surveys were first carried out in 2000/01 and were repeated during 2003/04. These survey-based measures form part of the wider suite of BVPIs on which councils are statutorily required to report.

2. The surveys were further undertaken during 2006/07, in accordance with a methodology and timetable prescribed by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the Audit Commission. The latest round of surveys included a 'General' Survey focusing on key areas of the Council's corporate performance and issues such as the environment, waste management, and cultural and recreational services, a Planning Survey, a Benefits (Housing/Council Tax) Survey and a (Council) Tenants Survey. A random sample approach was utilised in the case of the General Survey but, for the other surveys, specific users of the respective services were surveyed, and all of the surveys were carried out by self-completion postal questionnaire. The questions for each survey were prescribed by DCLG and could not be altered but, in addition to specific BVPI reporting, the surveys also sought the views of respondents in relation to additional quality of life (General Survey) and service improvement (Planning, Benefits and Tenants Surveys) issues.

3. For the completion of the General Survey, the Planning Survey and the Benefits Survey, the Council participated in joint arrangements with each of the other borough/district/unitary councils in Essex, as it had done previously in 2000/01 and 2003/04,

in order to secure a basis for benchmarking and comparison, and to achieve economies of scale. BMG Research Limited (General Survey, Planning Survey) and QA Research Limited (Benefits Survey) were appointed to undertake the surveys through Essex County Council's procurement arrangements, following the consideration of quotations invited from a number of survey consultancies. The National Housing Federation (NHF) was appointed to undertake the Tenants Survey directly by The Head of Housing Services, as it had satisfactorily carried out this exercise in both 2000/01 and 2003/04.

4. This report is concerned with the BVPI results arising from the General, Planning and Benefits Surveys, and how these compare with the authority's results from 2003/04, with the national average for 2006/07 (where available), and with the average of the other Essex district authorities for last year. As in previous years, representatives of the research agencies that conducted the surveys on behalf of the Council have been requested to make presentations to members on the overall results of each of the surveys, including the non-BVPI elements. With the agreement of the Leader of the Council, these presentations are to be held on 18 October 2007 and all members have been invited to attend. The results of the Tenants Survey have previously been comprehensively reported by the Head of Housing Services and are not therefore included in this report. The full report and results of each survey have been published on the Council's website, and copies have been deposited in the Members' Room.

#### General Survey:

5. The BVPI elements of the General Survey concerned a range of high-priority issues, including corporate performance and waste management, and the survey was conducted amongst a random sample of households in the district. The Council's individual BVPI results for the General Survey, compared with its satisfaction scores for the previous survey (2003/04) and the national and Essex (district councils) averages for 2006/07, were as follows:

<b>BVPI Ref</b>	<b>2003/04</b>	<b>2006/07</b>	<b>National Average 2006/07</b>	<b>Essex District Average 2006/07</b>
BV3 - Satisfaction with the way the Council runs things	55%	52%	54%	54%
BV4 - Satisfaction with the handling of complaints	32%	38%	34%	36%
BV89 - Satisfaction with the keeping of land clear of litter and rubbish	63%	65%	68%	71%
BV90(a) - Satisfaction with the waste collection service overall	85%	67%	79%	82%
BV90(b) - Satisfaction with the provision of local waste recycling facilities	78%	73%	70%	76%
BV119(a) - Satisfaction with sports and leisure facilities and events	46%	59%	58%	61%
BV119(b) - Satisfaction with libraries	Not collected	72%	73%	79%
BV119(c) - Satisfaction with museums and galleries	22%	24%	41%	34%
BV119(d) - Satisfaction with theatres and concert halls	20%	18%	41%	35%
BV119(e) - Satisfaction with parks and open spaces	74%	76%	73%	77%

6. Whilst a majority (52%) of respondents were satisfied with the Council's overall service, it is disappointing that this proportion was lower than that achieved for the survey when it was last undertaken during 2003/04 (55%). However, this result was only slightly lower than the national and Essex district average for 2006/07 (54%), both of which also

showed a decline in overall satisfaction over the last three years.

7. The General Survey revealed that over a quarter of all respondents had contacted the Council with a complaint in the last twelve months, amongst which just over a third (38%) were satisfied with the way their complaint was handled. This represents an improvement on that achieved in 2003/04 (32%), exceeded the national (34%) and Essex district (36%) averages for 2006/07, and placed the Council in the top performing 25% of district councils in relation to satisfaction with complaint handling for this round of the survey.

8. Almost two thirds of respondents (65%) were satisfied that the Council keeps open public land that it controls clear of litter and refuse. This also represented an increase on the results for 2003/04, when 63% of respondents were satisfied with cleanliness standards, but fell below the national (68%) and Essex district (71%) averages for 2006/07.

9. In terms of overall satisfaction with household waste collection, over two thirds of respondents (67%) were satisfied with the Council's arrangements. This was significantly lower than the satisfaction rating achieved in the 2003/04 survey (85%) and the national (79%) and Essex district (82%) averages for 2006/07. Almost three quarters (73%) of respondents were satisfied with the provision of local waste recycling facilities. Whilst this level of satisfaction was down on that achieved in 2003/04 (78%), it exceeded the national average for 2006/07 (70%) but was lower than the Essex district average (76%).

10. The level of satisfaction with the Council's sports and leisure facilities increased to 59% from 46% in 2003/04. This exceeded the national average for 2006/07 (58%), but fell short of the Essex district average (61%). Notwithstanding that the Council has no responsibility for library provision, almost three-quarters (72%) of respondents are satisfied with libraries in the district, although this figure is below both the national (73%) and Essex district (79%) averages for 2006/07. With almost a quarter (24%) of respondents satisfied, the level of satisfaction with museums and galleries was higher than the previous survey (21%), but again below both the national (41%) and Essex district (34%) averages for 2006/07. The level of satisfaction with theatres and concert halls was, at 18%, also similar to that achieved in 2003/04 (20%), although once more below both the national (41%) and Essex district (35%) averages for 2006/07. A total of 76% of respondents were satisfied with parks and open spaces in the district, an increase over 2003/04 (74%) that also exceeded the national average for 2006/07 (73%), but fell just short of the Essex district average for the year (77%).

11. In addition to BVPI reporting, the General Survey also assessed satisfaction with a range of services and issues affecting local quality of life. Full results of these non-BVPI elements of the survey are set out in the report prepared by BMG Research (deposited in the Members' Room) and will be reflected in the presentation to be made to members on 18 October 2007.

### **Planning Survey:**

12. The BVPI element of the Planning Survey concerned BV111 (Satisfaction with planning services by those making a planning application). The survey was conducted amongst applicants (and agents) for planning permission in a single defined period during 2006/07 and, for the purpose of BVPI reporting, assessed customer satisfaction in relation to the way in which the Council dealt with planning applications.

13. The Council's BVPI result for the Planning Survey, compared with its satisfaction score for the previous survey (2003/04) and the Essex average for 2006/07 (district councils), is as follows. National average comparisons are not currently available for the survey.

<b>BVPI Ref</b>	<b>2003/04</b>	<b>2006/07</b>	<b>Essex District Average 2006/07</b>
BV111 - Satisfaction with planning services by those making a planning application	71%	82%	71%

14. Satisfaction with planning services has increased significantly since 2003/04, and the satisfaction rating for 2006/07 represents the highest achieved by any of the Essex authorities. The Head of Planning and Economic Development is pleased with the improvements in satisfaction demonstrated by the survey, and that efforts to improve the lowest scoring elements over the last three years seem to have proved effective in leading to significantly improved levels of satisfaction in those areas.

15. In addition to BVPI reporting, the Planning Survey also assessed applicant/agent's satisfaction with the quality of specific planning services over the twelve-month period prior to the survey, and whether service elements had improved overall since the 2003/04 survey. Full results of these non-BVPI elements of the survey are set out in the report prepared by BMG Research (deposited in the Members' Room) and will be reflected in the presentation to be made to members on 18 October 2007.

#### **Benefits Survey:**

16. The BVPI element of the Benefits Survey concerned BV80 (Satisfaction with benefits services). The survey was conducted amongst all claimants for Housing/Council Tax Benefit in two defined periods during 2006/07 and, for the purpose of BVPI reporting, assessed customer satisfaction in relation to:

- facilities to contact the benefits office;
- the experience of visiting the benefits office;
- the telephone service provided by the benefits office;
- the service provided by the staff of the benefits office;
- the clarity of Housing/Council Tax Benefit claim forms;
- the amount of time taken to determine claims; and
- the overall service received at the benefits office.

17. The Council's BVPI results for each element of the Benefits Survey, compared with its satisfaction scores for the previous survey (2003/04) and the Essex average for 2006/07 (district councils), is as follows. National average comparisons are not currently available for the survey.

<b>BVPI Ref</b>	<b>2003/04</b>	<b>2006/07</b>	<b>Essex District Average 2006/07</b>
BV80(a) - Satisfaction with facilities to contact the benefits office	74%	77%	78%
BV80(b) - Satisfaction with the experience of visiting the benefits office	75%	82%	79%
BV80(c) - Satisfaction with the telephone service provided by the benefits office	72%	75%	71%
BV80(d) - Satisfaction with the service provided by the staff of the benefits office	80%	78%	81%
BV80(e) - Satisfaction with the clarity of Housing/Council Tax Benefit claim forms	65%	62%	63%
BV80(f) - Satisfaction with the amount of time taken to determine claims	74%	69%	71%
BV80(g) - Overall satisfaction with the service received at the benefits office	81%	77%	78%

18. In addition to BVPI reporting, the Benefits Survey also assessed the elements of the current Housing/Council Tax Benefit claim process that respondents felt were most in need of

improvement. Full results of this non-BVPI element of the survey are set out in the report prepared by QA Research (deposited in the Members' Room) and will be reflected in the presentation to be made to members on 18 October 2007.

### **Conclusions:**

19. Although it is welcome that the recent surveys have revealed that satisfaction levels have increased or been maintained in a majority of areas, it should be emphasised that the results reflect respondents' views of the quality of services provided by the Council at the time the surveys were undertaken, and that satisfaction can be adversely affected by negative publicity and perception in relation to both local and national issues. Over the last year the Council has been subject to such negative publicity in relation to several high profile waste management and planning issues, and it is therefore encouraging that, in a number of instances, the authority's actual performance is much better than the satisfaction levels revealed by the surveys indicate.

20. Although the most significant deterioration in satisfaction over the last three years has been in relation to the authority's waste management service, the General Survey was carried out during late 2006 when household waste collections had reverted to an alternate weekly system in place of the weekly collections that had operated throughout last Summer, and it is believed that this might have had a negative impact on satisfaction levels. Although local authorities across the country have witnessed reduced satisfaction results for waste management services, with national average satisfaction in relation to household waste collection showing an overall decline of 5% since 2003/04, the Council's actual recycling performance has improved significantly since the introduction of the new waste management arrangements in 2005/06 and the amount of refuse recycled has doubled to nearly 40%, placing the authority second only to Uttlesford District Council in terms of the recycling performance of Essex authorities.

21. Slightly over half of all respondents (51%) that made a complaint to the Council in 2006/07 were dissatisfied with the way their complaint was handled. However levels of dissatisfaction with the way that the Council deals with issues such as complaints, planning applications and benefit claims need to be viewed with some caution, as satisfaction can often be significantly affected by the outcome of the complaint, application or claim, rather than purely how it was handled. This point is particularly relevant in terms of the Benefits Survey, where levels of satisfaction were sought from all claimants, including those whose claims were refused or were subject to recovery action by the Council.

22. Although many respondents were satisfied with cultural facilities such as libraries, museums and galleries, these results need to be considered in context. It is possible that some respondents were unclear as to which local authority provided these services, as the Council is not responsible for the provision of libraries, and there are extremely small numbers of museums, galleries, theatres and concert halls in the district, very few of which are provided or operated by the authority. This view is supported by the fact that the Council's satisfaction levels for cultural facilities are all below the respective Essex district averages for 2006/07.

23. Improvements in satisfaction with the way the Council deals with planning and benefits applications reflect additional resources and investment made in these priority areas since the 2003/04 round of surveys. The most significant deterioration in satisfaction with the Council's Benefits Service over the last three years is in relation to the amount of time taken to determine benefit claims. Although satisfaction has decreased by 5% since 2003/04, the Council's actual performance in determining claims has improved from an average of 34 days in 2003/04 to an average of 28 days in 2006/07.

### **Publication of Survey Results:**

24. The BVPI results of each of the surveys were required to be reported in the Best Value Performance Plan for 2007/08, which was adopted by the Council at its meeting on 28 June 2007. The survey results for all local authorities will be published nationally by the Audit Commission shortly, and summary survey results will also be published in the Winter 2007 edition of the 'Forester' magazine.

### **Future Surveys:**

25. Since the completion of the 2006/07 round of surveys, a number of Essex authorities have expressed interest in repeating some or all of the surveys during 2007/08, and possibly on an annual basis each year between the requirement for the statutory surveys, as a means of gathering interim satisfaction data and tracking performance. It is understood that most of the authorities that are interested in repeating the surveys in 2007/08 require the further delivery of the General Survey only, although a minority also wish to re-run the Benefits, Planning and Tenants surveys.

26. As members are aware, the General Survey focuses on key areas of the Council's corporate performance and issues such as the environment, waste management, and cultural and recreational services, in addition to reflecting a range of quality of life issues. A repeat of the survey could therefore be of use in measuring early satisfaction with new waste management arrangements and the external management of the authority's leisure facilities. Management Board considers that it would therefore be beneficial to run the survey again during 2007/08, and participating Essex authorities have indicated to interested research agencies that each council must receive their individual survey results and reports by no later than 31 January 2008, in order for the results to inform budgets for 2008/09.

27. A lead authority has sought quotations for the repeat of the surveys from the individual research agencies (QA Research, BMG Research IPSOS Mori, MRUK Research) that between them undertook all of the 2006/07 surveys across Essex. Although it will obviously be the case that the greater the take up amongst authorities the lower the overall cost will be for each repeat survey, it is anticipated that survey costs will be similar to those for 2006/07, and that these could be met from the consultation budget of the Performance Management Unit for the current year. Any surveys repeated in 2007/08 would be undertaken in accordance with the methodology prescribed by the Department for Communities and Local Government for the 2006/07 round.

28. The Cabinet Committee is therefore asked to note that it is intended that the General Survey will be repeated during 2007/08. In view of the level of service specific resources involved in repeating the Benefits, Planning and Tenants surveys, Management Board has determined that these not be undertaken again during the current year.

### **Statement in Support of Recommended Action:**

29. The Council is statutorily required to undertake the customer satisfaction surveys every three years. This report and the member presentations to be made on the survey results on 18 October 2007 provides local and national context for the individual results.

30. To ensure that the Council takes account of feedback in relation to its services and that the results of the customer satisfaction surveys are used to inform service development and improvement, and future plans and priorities.

**Other Options Considered and Rejected:**

31. None. The Council is statutorily required to undertake the customer satisfaction surveys every three years and to use the results of the customer satisfaction surveys to inform service development and improvement, and future plans and priorities.

**Consultation Undertaken:**

32. This report has been subject to consultation with the Finance, Performance Management and Corporate Support Services Portfolio Holder, the Chief Executive, and Senior Management Team.

**Resource Implications:**

**Budget/Personnel/Land:** None.

**Council Plan/Best Value Performance Plan Reference:** Section 8 – ‘How We Measure Our Achievements’.

**Relevant Statutory Powers:** It is a statutory requirement for all councils to carry out the BVPI Customer Satisfaction Surveys every three years.

**Background Papers:** The individual survey reports of each research agency have been placed in the Members’ Room and published on the Council’s website

**Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications:** None

**Key Decision Reference: (if required)** None